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**SUN TZU, CLAUSEWITZ, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF
KNOWING YOURSELF AND THE ENEMY**

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SUN TZU, CLAUSEWITZ, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF KNOWING YOURSELF AND THE ENEMY

Sun Tzu said:

Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril. When you are ignorant of the enemy but know yourself, your chances of winning or losing are equal. If ignorant both of your enemy and of yourself, you are certain in every battle to be in peril.

This deceptively simple instruction, properly applied, is at the essence both of making a sound decision to go to war and of strategic and tactical planning once that decision has been made. Clausewitz further developed this instruction. The purpose of this essay is to apply Sun Tzu's instruction, drawing on similar principles as articulated by Clausewitz, to determine what, in the modern era, knowing oneself and one's enemy requires at the national strategy, national military, and operational levels. I will then demonstrate that in Vietnam and Somalia, the United States let itself get into situations where it knew neither itself nor the enemy, while in Desert Storm, we succeeded because we knew both. Finally, the essay will assess at which level knowledge of oneself and one's enemy is most important.

NATIONAL STRATEGIC LEVEL

Sun Tzu instructs us that in order to succeed one must know oneself and one's enemy. This dictum is reflected in Clausewitz's statement that "War is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will." (Paret, pg 75) To accomplish the purpose of war, then, we must know both our own will and how to compel our enemy.

The will of a nation is a complex matter. While never completely "knowable," the will of one's own nation can perhaps be best ascertained by seeking to understand

who we are as a nation. Is the nation, for example, poor or wealthy? Do it have commonly shared beliefs from which interests logically derive? How are those interests defined? What costs and risks is the nation willing to accept to attain its interests? Within the picture formed by its defined interests, can it also define a specific set of objectives with respect to the subject of the conflict? The necessity of defining these objectives is highlighted by Clausewitz:

No one starts a war -- or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so -- without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it. The former is its political purpose; the latter its operational objective. (Paret, page 579)

But even if objectives are identified, these objectives must be translated by the political leadership into a corresponding national will. If the objectives cannot be or are not translated into a national will, then the nation will lack the moral strength and staying power to make another nation comply with its will. This requires determined and clear-headed thinking at the level of political leadership -- where "will" is politically determined. If interests and objectives are not clear, and if no national will can be identified or created, a realistic self assessment would lead to the conclusion that embarking on war is foolhardy. If, on the other hand, the interests and objectives are clarified, and national will is identified or created, then the nation has a reasonable chance of success. As stated by Sun Tzu, however, knowing only yourself does not ensure victory. The enemy must also be known.

While Sun Tzu identified the need to know the enemy, the assessments prescribed focused largely on the enemy's military capability. Clausewitz was more specific regarding the knowledge of the enemy required and also added the critical

factor of the enemy's will:

If you want to overcome your enemy you must match your effort against his power of resistance, which can be expressed as the product of two inseparable factors, viz. the total means at his disposal and the strength of his will. The extent of the means at his disposal is a matter -- through not exclusively -- of figures, and should be measurable. But the strength of his will is much less easy to determine and can only be gauged approximately by the strength of the motive animating it. (Paret, page 77)

Since the purpose of war is to compel the enemy to do one's will, almost certainly not in a manner not considered to be in the enemy's interests, the purpose of war cannot be effectively attained without a clear idea of what it will take to compel that nation. Can economic or diplomatic action compel the enemy to do one's will? If not, what level of military action will be sufficient to compel them? Will, for example, a limited show of force be sufficient to compel them or are they prepared to fight indefinitely with an indefinite set of losses? Such knowledge of the enemy would facilitate the development of national political objectives that are more likely to be attainable at a reasonably understood level of cost.

The assessment of one's national objectives and will, combined with the assessment of what it will take to compel the enemy to do one's will, must be applied to the question of whether one's nation is indeed prepared to go to war, and what type of war it is likely to be. Once the enemy is engaged, however, the objectives, the enemy's will, and indeed the nation's will can change. The national leadership must continue efforts to evaluate and if necessary re-inspire the national will. The enemy's will and capability should be reassessed, and objectives must be evaluated for continuing currency. The outcome of these reassessments must be part of an

ongoing and clear dialogue between the national political leadership and the military leadership.

NATIONAL MILITARY LEVEL

Clausewitz identified the requirement for dialogue between the national political leadership and the military commander. He first established that war is an act of policy: "When whole communities go to war -- whole peoples, and especially civilized peoples -- the reason always lies in some political situation, and the occasion is always due to some political object. War, therefore, is an act of policy." Thus,

"War in general, and the commander in any specific instance, is entitled to require that the trend and designs of policy shall not be inconsistent with these means . . . the political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose." (Paret, page 86-87)

Clausewitz's guidance has logical roots in Sun Tzu's instruction to "know one's self." At the national military level, knowing yourself and your enemy would necessarily lead to a practical dialogue as advocated by Clausewitz between the political leadership and the military leadership. The purpose of this dialogue is to ensure the proper alignment of ends and means.

Clausewitz emphasizes the critical nature and level of this dialogue:

If war is to be fully consonant with political objectives, and policy suited to the means available for war, then unless statesman and soldier are combined in one person, the only sound expedient is to make the commander-in-chief a member of the cabinet, so that the cabinet can share in the major aspects of his activities. (Paret, page 608)

The clear implication is that even if the political leadership knows the political purpose for which the nation is prepared to go to war, or believes it knows the

purpose, these objectives cannot be attained through war unless the military tool is employed in explicit pursuit of military objectives that support those political objectives. If the political objectives are unclear to the political leadership or imprecisely communicated to the military leadership, then it will be difficult to establish military objectives that lead directly to achievement of the political objectives. Divergence or lack of symbiosis between the political and military objectives will prohibit unity for national and war purposes. Such a 'split personality' cannot know itself.

In practice, then, if the military leadership has come to understand the political objectives, but determines that with the available resources the military objectives cannot be attained, then this must be communicated to the political leadership so that a required change in political objectives can be considered. If it is not, defeat is more likely because eventually, even if the nation goes to war, the goals originally defined cannot be obtained. Should national will, military objectives, or the capabilities or commitment of the enemy change during the course of the war this dialogue must be resumed. Military objectives and military means must be rematched to any such changes.

OPERATIONAL LEVEL

At the operational level, knowing oneself and one's enemy requires knowledge of not only the military objective to be reached, but also what is required to reach it. This, in turn, requires knowledge of both one's own and the enemy's ability to apply force to those respective objectives. Commanders' assessments of their own forces must include not just numbers but the physical and moral capabilities of his forces.

He must also seek the best possible assessment of the enemy's force capabilities in both physical and moral terms and what the enemy is likely to try to do to prevent the commander from attaining victory. In addition, the commander must have knowledge of, among other things, the terrain. In making these judgments, intelligence is a vital factor, but must be accompanied by the genius of the commander. Terrain, for example, while largely determinable from intelligence, particularly in the modern era, is also, as noted by Clausewitz, a matter of the sense and genius of the commander. Terrain exists. On the other hand, its meaning may not be readily apparent, and its utilization to the benefit of the forces is not a matter of data but of perception and analysis. Similarly, an understanding of the best method of employing forces is not a matter of intelligence but of the genius and insight of the commander. What the enemy is likely to do to stop you is largely a product of good intelligence, but may also require the sense and genius of the commander. If, for example, a reliable spy had information regarding the intentions of the enemy, but these were changed at the last minute, the commander must make adjustments on the ground to respond.

Clausewitz highlighted the need to respond quickly:

War is the realm of uncertainty; three quarters of the factors on which action in war is based are wrapped in a fog of greater or lesser uncertainty. A sensitive and discriminating judgment is called for; a skilled intelligence to scent out the truth. (Paret, page 101)

Clear knowledge of the enemy's forces and your own are prerequisites to a commander's decisions as to what adjustments can and should be made.

CONSEQUENCES OF PROPER OR IMPROPER APPLICATION

In Vietnam and Somalia, the United States found itself in situations where it knew neither itself nor the enemy. At the national strategic level, in the case of Vietnam, we understood neither the national will of the enemy nor what would be required to compel him to do our will. To whatever degree the United States ever had a clear political objective, knew itself and knew the enemy, it was not reflected in the articulation of military objectives. Even assuming a one-time knowledge of our objectives and a sense of national will, during the period of the war, who we were as a nation, as well as any measurable element of our national will, changed. The enemy came to be seen by the nation as stronger and far more determined than originally portrayed. Since the nation we became in the 1970s was incapable of compelling the enemy to do our will, we were compelled to do the enemy's will. Despite this transition from whom we were to whom we became, military commanders were neither consulted nor instructed to make analogous adjustments in military objectives. The necessary dialogue between the military and civilian leadership seemingly did not take place, and as a result, lives and treasure were expended for unattainable objectives. The political defeat of the United States, due to a miscalculation of national will, made military victory not only impossible, but undefinable.

In Somalia, the nation had the will to employ military force in support of a humanitarian objective that was articulated by a broad consensus at the national political level. No such articulation was apparent, however, when that objective, having been achieved, was broadened. Instead, nation building was asserted as a

new goal at the national level and the pursuit of an indigenous warlord was defined as the military mission that would support it. No effort was undertaken to engage in the political debate and consensus building necessary in democracies to shape unified political objectives and the will to expend effort, lives, and treasure to obtain these objectives. Thus, at the national strategic level, we did not know ourselves. We had no clearly defined national objective that was consistent with a national will. Who the enemy was, how committed he was to attaining his objectives, and his capability to thwart our objectives was not clear to the nation. At the national military level, no effective dialogue seems to have taken place between civilian and military leadership to educate one another as to how US political objectives were to be attained by a specific military campaign or mission. At the operational level, there seems to have been sufficient intelligence regarding what the Somalians intended, what capabilities they possessed, and how far they were prepared to go to attain their objectives, but since there was no effective dialogue between military and political leadership, it didn't matter. Hence, political leaders denied the commander's request for the tools necessary to attain the defined military objectives. Once again, the US was unable to compel an enemy, weaker by any measurement other than will, to do its will. We rather will be compelled to do the enemy's will and leave the region with our enemy in power, probably undermining our humanitarian success in the process. Sun Tzu's instruction, to our peril, was beyond the reach of our decision making processes.

In contrast, in Desert Storm, the United States did a remarkable job of analyzing and acting in consonance with Sun Tzu and Clausewitz's instructions on

knowing the self and the enemy. As a result, the United States succeeded in compelling the enemy to do our will. The Bush Administration developed a set of clearly defined national objectives, debated and explained them at each phase, organized a bi-partisan consensus, and shaped the national will. Iraq, in the person of Saddam Hussein, made itself and its intentions clear. In addition, our actions in the diplomatic and economic arena, focused in support of political goals and strengthened by national will and military capability, further clarified U.S. knowledge of Iraqi intentions and commitment to resist our will. Our national objectives in Desert Shield and Desert Storm were clearly communicated at the national military level to the commanders and a set of military objectives were developed that could be translated into a definition of victory, which make military planning possible and furthered the attainment of the national objectives. At the operational level, the intelligence and execution was excellent, enabling victory without major casualty counts. The commanders seem to have been capable of using the terrain to our advantage, and knew the Iraqi capabilities and how to defeat them.¹

THE CRITICAL LEVEL

In all three cases, the United States "knew itself" at the military level and correctly measured itself as superior. The national level, however, appears to be critical. The national political factor can be either a force-multiplier or a force-divider depending on how effectively we know ourselves. As seen particularly in the Viet

¹ Interestingly, it would seem that Saddam Hussein failed in his assessments of the United States and the power of a democracy that has harnessed its national will and power.

Nam case, battlefield victories cannot attain unknown, changing, or unarticulated national objectives, particularly since these ambiguities almost certainly will result in a lack of national will. While lack of knowledge of the self and the enemy at the operational level can lead to a defeat in battle, lack of knowledge of self and the enemy at the national level will almost certainly result in national defeat. Thus, consistent with the instructions of Sun Tzu and practical implementation of Clausewitzian theory, the United States has succeeded when we knew ourselves and our enemy and has failed when we did not know ourselves or our enemy.

CONCLUSION

At the national strategic level, knowing oneself and one's enemy entails assessments of the political, economic and moral factors that shape objectives, and the ability to conduct war as prescribed by Clausewitz. At the national military level, knowing oneself and one's enemy requires, for the practical dialogue advocated by Clausewitz between the political leadership and the military leadership, matching the political objective and military objectives. This is especially important in a democratic system where political and military leaders must speak the same language to the population at each step of the way. At the operational level, knowing one's enemy and oneself requires realistic self assessments and the greatest possible intelligence regarding the enemy. Failure to know oneself or one's enemy at any one of these levels leads to defeat. Indeed, failure to know ourself and our enemy has led to defeat for the United States, while successful application of these principles has led to victory.

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